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## Special Thematic Section on "Rethinking Prefigurative Politics"

# Examining Prejudice Reduction Through Solidarity and Togetherness Experiences Among Gezi Park Activists in Turkey

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### Abstract

Prejudice reduction research has focused on reducing negative regard as a means to improve relations between various groups (e.g., religious, ethnic, political). Though positive regard between groups may be created, these forms of contact and common identification do not alter policy orientations of advantaged groups toward disadvantaged ones. Rather than intergroup contact, it is suggested that a collective action model of prejudice reduction (Dixon, J., Levine, M., Reicher, S., & Durrheim, K. (2012). Beyond prejudice: Are negative evaluations the problem and is getting us to like one another more the solution? Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 35, 411-425) would create ties between disadvantaged groups to work toward beneficial policy change. We seek to show that the Gezi Park protests in Taksim, İstanbul functioned as an intergroup phenomenon, requiring the cooperation of a number of disadvantaged groups (e.g., feminists, Kurds) working together to improve the status of all present. In a series of interviews with 34 activists from the Gezi Park protests, participants were to reflect on their individual and group-based experiences during their time in the Gezi Park protests. Data indicate that although a few groups remained distant or disconnected during the protests, a common ground was achieved such that some participants were able to overcome past prejudices. Data also indicate that through group perceptions and individuals' descriptions of events, groups who had previously not been able to cooperate were able to work and stick together at Gezi. Results also imply, in line with Dixon et al. (2012), that if disadvantaged groups work together, they might change the position of their groups and improve each group's disadvantaged position via collective action.

**Keywords:** intergroup relations, prejudice reduction, collective action, solidarity, protest

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Prejudice reduction research has generally focused on reducing negative regard as a means to improve relations between groups. Contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954; Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and the common ingroup identity model (CIIM; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000, 2009) describe methods of bringing groups together in order to reduce intergroup bias and foster positive responses such as liking and empathy.

Though these methods may foster positive regard between groups, contact and common identification do not alter policy orientations of advantaged groups toward disadvantaged ones. Dominant group members are loath to give away power and privileges, and contact has a kind of “sedative effect” on the disadvantaged, making them less likely to engage in action that would benefit their social group (Dixon, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2007). Rather than intergroup contact, we propose that a collective action model of prejudice reduction (Dixon, Levine, Reicher, & Durrheim, 2012; Drury & Reicher, 2009; Klandermans, 1997; van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) is necessary to bring about social justice and create ties between disadvantaged groups to work together to create mutually beneficial policy change. With a collective action model, an “us” vs. “them” mentality, typically seen as problematic, is seen as useful, encouraging members of disadvantaged groups to form coalitions with one another and act toward a common interest.

When citizens discovered that Gezi Park in central İstanbul (generally known as Taksim), Turkey, would be demolished and replaced by a shopping mall, they began a series of protests that ultimately resulted in an occupation of the park. Although participants came from different backgrounds and different political perspectives, these individuals were able to come together for a common cause and managed to prevent the park’s destruction. Following the protests, a sense of solidarity between people who had previously been at odds created a new social and political landscape. Utilizing the collective action model of prejudice reduction, and examining the context of the Gezi Park protests, this paper aims to explore the relationship of burgeoning solidarity between disadvantaged groups in a collective action setting, and its impact on prejudice reduction both during and after the protests.

## Prejudice Reduction Research

Past research into intergroup relations and reduction of intergroup conflict (notably, Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961) paid little attention to the real-world contexts within which intergroup prejudice situations exist. Although advocates of prejudice reduction have historically focused on fostering positive regard, less focus has been given to whether changes in affect actually improve the status of minority groups.

Real-world relations of domination and subordination are rarely taken into account when trying to understand these types of intergroup relations. Jackman (1994) argues that warm emotions between dominant and subordinate groups are not necessarily an indication of equal status. In systems of long-term, stable inequality, it is more beneficial for dominant groups to create a paternalistic system with subordinate groups, rather than a hostile or negative one. In this way, role differentiation is defined by dominants who reward subordinates who fit the expected ideal for their role. Gender relations are the clearest illustration of paternalistic influences. Men display warm emotions toward women, even more so than toward other men. Women are venerated and inspire protectiveness and admiration, but only so long as they conform to traditional gender roles (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989).

Research on racial issues also supports the idea of a preference for a paternalistic system between dominant and subordinate groups. A national survey on race attitudes in the United States, for example, showed that while many white Americans (39%) express inclusive feelings toward African Americans, they also express conservative or reactionary attitudes toward policies that would create racial equality in housing, employment and education (Jackman, 1994). This indicates that power dynamics might not be consistent with affect toward the outgroup.

Another area of concern with traditional prejudice reduction models is the inherent push for assimilation that comes about from creating a common ingroup identity. Dovidio, Gaertner, and Saguy (2009) mention the “darker side of we,” wherein members of historically advantaged groups often favor assimilative forms of inclusion, whereas

members of disadvantaged groups prefer a dual-identity model. A common ingroup identity, therefore, does not necessarily lead to support for policies designed to produce structural change in historically unequal societies. Interestingly, appeals to “common humanity” also encourage victims to accept discrimination, rather than work to reduce it. According to [Greenaway, Quinn, and Louis \(2011\)](#), common humanity is often suggested as a method of uniting victims and perpetrators of historical atrocities. This strategy increases forgiveness of perpetrators, but also lowers intentions to engage in collective action.

Research on common identification suggests that even when individuals are successful in creating more positive intergroup attitudes, the conservative policy orientations of the historically advantaged, but not disadvantaged, may remain unaltered. Importantly, research on paternalistic social relations suggests that some positive or “benevolent” attitudes not only coexist with social inequality, but also serve as a mechanism through which it is reproduced.

### Collective Action Research and the Importance of Context

Previous research on crowd dynamics has demonstrated changes in identification within crowds based on their interactions with external forces like police (see [Drury & Reicher, 2005](#)). First time protesters, faced with police who view them as dangerous and oppositional, come to see the police as illegitimate opposition to their own “legitimate” activities ([Reicher, 1984](#)). An extended ingroup category forms among different crowd members, producing increased solidarity, empowerment, and willingness to challenge outgroups such as the police. These perceptions and subsequent interactions created a process of escalation, and led to a series of important changes: participants’ sense of self as a moderate crowd member to oppositional crowd member, identification with more members of the crowd, a change in empowerment and sense of efficacy, and a change in the reason for collective action from the specific goal of the initial protest to a need to challenge illegitimate authority ([Reicher, 1984](#); [Stott & Reicher, 1998](#)).

### Creating Coalitions for Social Change

In trying to understand how a sense of “oneness” can come out of the crowd, issues of identity and the group are crucial. A sense of identity with other protesters allows individuals to see themselves as connected to the fate of those around them, and the stronger the sense of shared fate, the more likely individuals are to feel attachment to the group and perceive injustice against other members as injustice against the self. As mentioned earlier, the presence and perceptions of relevant outgroups such as the police also greatly affect the function and beliefs of the protest group ([Drury & Reicher, 2005, 2009](#)).

According to the collective action model of prejudice reduction ([Dixon et al., 2012](#)), dominant group members rarely give away their power and privileges. Rather, power and privileges must be wrested from them by subordinate groups. In contrast to most modes of prejudice reduction research, which focus on the attitudes of the dominant group toward the subordinate group, the analytic focus is on the resistance put in place by subordinates. This model highlights the importance of collective action in achieving social justice. It states that social change is based upon mass mobilization, a process that typically brings representatives of historically disadvantaged groups into conflict with historically advantaged groups.

Collective action interventions are based on the assumption that group identification is a powerful motor of social change. Within this model of change, an “us” versus “them” mentality is generally seen as functional and strategic: it encourages members of disadvantaged groups to display in-group loyalty and commitment to the cause of

changing society and to form coalitions with similar groups in order to act together in a common interest (Craig & Richeson, 2012; Klandermans, 1997; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

## The Gezi Park Context

The Taksim Project, one of the many ongoing urban renewal projects of İstanbul, aimed to redevelop Gezi Park and the surrounding Taksim Square area. On May 27, 2013, a small number of activists gathered in Gezi Park after bulldozers arrived to cut down trees in the park. Over the next few days, more and more people, who witnessed what they considered disproportionate force on the part of the police, joined the activists. In the end, thousands gathered in the park and pushed out the developers and police. Activists spent the next 15 days camped out in the park, where they created discussion forums, classes, cooked, cleaned, and lived together communally. The protests spread to 79 of 81 provinces in Turkey, with at least three million people participating in the protests around the country.<sup>i</sup> An initial reaction to the destruction of a park turned into a response to police brutality, as well as a more general reaction to the policies of the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) over the previous 11 years, such as restrictions on alcohol, restrictions on the morning after pill, and policies toward Syria. The AKP responded by giving orders to the police to end the communal life in the Gezi Park. Additionally, the then Prime Minister Erdoğan in particular tried to downplay the scale and effect of the protests, saying they would not be influenced by “a few *çapulcu*.”<sup>iii</sup>

The protests were unique in their ability to bring together a number of different groups whose central – and sometimes only – common ground was their opposition to the AKP. Religious and ethnic minorities (i.e., Kurds, Alevis, and Armenians) had a large presence in the protest, as a part of and alongside leftist political parties and organizations (e.g., socialist and main opposition parties), as well as nationalist and Kemalist-minded<sup>iii</sup> groups who, until the AKP came into power, maintained a more comfortable, advantaged position in society. Although participants had different backgrounds and different political positions, they were able to come together for a common cause, and managed to prevent the destruction of the park and resist injustice inflicted upon them.

## The Current Study

In order to understand the interactions and perceptions of these groups toward one another, it is important to note that, beyond simple contact, these are traditionally and newly disadvantaged groups, who, by working together, sought to create lasting policy changes that would impact not only their environment but also the government's position toward the groups themselves. As discussed above, psychological research on collective action (Dixon et al., 2012; Drury & Reicher, 2009; Klandermans, 1997; van Zomeren et al., 2008) has been based on the assumption that group identification is a powerful motor of social change. Identification (e.g., identifying as a *çapulcu* or Gezi Park protester) functions to create a new dynamic wherein members of different disadvantaged groups (e.g., political, ethnic, religious) are encouraged to form coalitions with similarly disadvantaged groups, and to act together in their common interest (e.g., by preventing the demolition of the park).

Although traditionally and newly disadvantaged groups may arguably have different motivations in the long run, and one cannot say what the case will be for sure if the AKP government loses power, as argued above, collective action functions to bring these disadvantaged groups together when it seems it is the only way left to challenge the authoritarian AKP regime. In addition to empowerment experiences, we argue that collective action between disadvantaged groups who had not previously worked together will reduce prejudice between the groups. This is an important step that will lead to solidarity between the groups in the Gezi Park protests, and ultimately bring

about a situation where disadvantaged groups are able to make their voices heard, through conflict with the advantaged group (i.e., the AKP government).

## Method

### Participants

In the present study, interviews were conducted with 34 activist participants from across Turkey, including Hatay, Ankara, Adana, Mersin, Rize and İstanbul. The participants were chosen based on their membership in a group, political party, or institution. A snowball method was used to reach further participants.<sup>iv</sup> Two participants were Alevi activists, two Anti-capitalist Muslims, three *Beşiktaş* football club supporters (*Çarşı*), two feminist activists, two LGBTI activists, three Kurdish activists, four labor union members, seven members of different socialist parties, four Kemalists, two *Ülkücü*,<sup>v</sup> and three from the Taksim Solidarity Platform. Twenty-four out of 34 participants were men, eight were women, one identified as a trans woman and one chose to identify as “other”. The ages of participants ranged from 22 to 63 ( $M = 35.26$ ). Eighteen participants were interviewed face-to-face while 16 participants were interviewed online via Skype.

### Procedure

Before the start of interviews, all participants were informed of the purpose of the study. Participants were asked to reflect on their individual and group-based experiences during their time in the Gezi Park protests, their presence as a member of a particular political party or organization, the reasons their group participated in the protests, and the relationships between their group and other groups at the park. In order to better understand intergroup dynamics in the protests, participants were also asked to reflect on which groups they felt close or distant to and the reasons they felt that way. Lastly, participants were asked about the outcomes of their participation and the potential change the protests brought about.

Interviews were conducted in Turkish and in settings determined by the participants, such as cafes or participants' offices. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researchers verbatim. Transcriptions were translated by the bilingual researchers; a native English speaker was consulted on the fluency of translation. The length of the interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 96 minutes, with an average of approximately 45 minutes. In addition, a triangulation of data sources was used to construct a sequence of events (Denzin, 1989). Incidents are reported to the extent that there is agreement between different sources (i.e., protest participants, news reports, images).

### Analysis

Participant accounts of events were analyzed using Qualitative Content Analysis (Schreier, 2012), which helped reduce data and focus on selected portions for relevant questions. Questions were developed before data collection based on two main dimensions of collective action literature: *perceived injustice* and *perceived efficacy* (e.g., Dixon et al., 2012; van Zomeren et al., 2008). One more question based on understanding *intergroup relations* between the protesters was also added. The first question, “Why did you want to join the protests?” focused on reasons for participation (*perceived injustice*). This question aimed to understand the disadvantaged position of the participants in society. The second question, “Outside of your own group, did you feel a sense of closeness with any other group that participated in the Gezi Park protests?” was asked to understand the solidarity experiences



of the participants with other groups (*intergroup relations*). The third question, “Do you feel these protests will bring about some kind of change?” aimed to understand empowerment experiences as well as prejudice reduction dynamics among protesters (*perceived efficacy*).

These three domains became the basis of the three main categories in the coding frame. Concept-driven strategies were utilized to develop the main categories. After specifying the main categories, subcategories were identified and stated in the material in relation to these main categories (Schreier, 2012). Subcategories were developed in a data-driven way (inductively). Schreier's (2012) thematic criterion formed the basis for the division of coding units in the material. The conceptualization of the theme in the material was decided whenever a new topic or an idea was introduced. For trial coding, 10% of the overall data (5 pages out of 56 pages) were chosen. Data were coded independently by the researchers to check inter-rater reliability. The obtained Kappa of the first main category (*perceived injustice*) was .73, the second main category (*intergroup relations*) .76, and the third main category (*perceived efficacy*) 1.00. According to Landis and Koch (1977, p. 165), the reliability of main categories can be considered substantial (*perceived injustice*, *intergroup relations*) or almost perfect (*perceived efficacy*). Categories that were assigned differently were re-examined and discussed, and the coding frame was modified accordingly.

## Results

### Main Category 1: Reasons for Protest Participation (Perceived Injustice)

Participants discussed various reasons for participation in the Gezi Park protests. Participants were asked questions both as individuals and also as representatives of their groups. This main category included three subcategories: 1) characteristics of their own group that necessitated their participation, 2) Gezi was a consequence of preceding events, and 3) an overall sense of injustice in the actions of the police toward the initial protest participants spurred them to action.

#### Characteristics of Their Group

For one Kurdish participant, the police brutality of the Gezi Park protests reminded him of Turkey in the 1990's. For Kurds, this was an especially difficult time, when Kurdish regions of the country were declared to be in a state of emergency, resulting in increased police and military surveillance and instances of brutality.

Coming from such an environment, the police brutality at Gezi reminded me of the 90's. With the times being this advanced, attempting to silence people in such a cruel way at once brought me both mentally and emotionally to the 90's. (Kurdish activist 2)

Other participants made specific references to the party or organization they were a part of. They pointed out the characteristics or the founding principles of the group, and noted these as their main reasons for participation.

The reason we were there is actually the reason TGB<sup>vi</sup> (*Türkiye Gençlik Birliği* – Youth Union of Turkey) was founded. When the TGB was founded in 2006, as Turkish youth, our goals were protecting the legacy Atatürk left behind, developing the principles and revolution of Atatürk, and replacing the ruined republic with a new one. (TGB activist)

### The Culmination of Recent Events

Many participants mentioned increasing problems in the public domain or with the current government. Events such as the explosion in Reyhanlı<sup>vii</sup> or the massacre in Roboski<sup>viii</sup> were mentioned. Turkey's policy on events in Syria was also brought up, as it affected participants in the border city of Hatay.

The problems of Arab Alevis are not just the policies of the AKP. The problem is also the trouble in the conflict in Syria and the AKP working with Al Qaeda and Al Nusra in this conflict. In this city, we have, since the beginning of this conflict, been living on the same streets as the most ferocious and savage of these terrorists for three years. We see them in the parks, in the hospitals, because the AKP has turned Antakya into the logistic center for their dirty war in Syria. (Alevi activist)

General political policies, such as limitations on alcohol purchases, the morning after pill, or attempts to further restrict abortion were also discussed by other participants.

Actually the buildup of the problems in Turkey came out in Taksim's Gezi Park. Before Gezi, it was the prevention of May Day [celebrations], increases in security in stadiums, telling women how many children they should have, prohibiting abortion, prohibitions on alcohol... I mean it was a response to the intervention in the lives of the people we refer to as secular, living modern, contemporary lives. Of course this [response] was mostly toward Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan and the AKP government. (EMEP - Labor Party)

Specific to İstanbul were focuses on urban renewal, the privatization of public space, and the AKP's restriction on May Day demonstrations.<sup>ix</sup>

There is a park there and besides the park, especially for the LGBT community, Taksim is an important living space. A bit of May Day, the recent events, everyone got fed up. Showing a reaction, I believed I couldn't stay home so I didn't. (LGBTI activist)

### Experiencing Injustice as a Common Group

Importantly, perceptions of injustice were felt among a variety of different groups. Even those who could be considered "newly" disadvantaged, such as Kemalists, had felt an increasing sense of threat to their ideals (e.g., secularism) under the conservative AKP government for the last 11 years. Historically disadvantaged groups such as Armenians were able to use Gezi as a platform to introduce their problems to a new crowd who were able to hear their frustrations possibly for the first time.

...once Gezi Park was an Armenian cemetery and that was totally forgotten, one of Nor Zartonk's<sup>x</sup> striking slogans was "you destroyed our cemetery; but you won't be able to take away our park." (SYKP – Socialist Party of Refoundation)

Others described the protests as a place where all who felt disadvantaged were able to find a common ground.

The people who came there are those who had dealt with the inequality of society for years, and were just looking for a place to take refuge. It was like that for me, and for my friend. These were all people who had been victims of injustice. (Çarşı)



## Main Category 2: Solidarity Experiences (Intergroup Relations)

This main category included four subcategories: 1) protesting with others they had not protested with before, 2) newfound appreciation for other groups through perspective-taking, 3) interaction and solidarity across groups, and 4) constructive social change.

### Protesting With Others They Had not Protested With Before

Participants described working together with groups they had not previously had a connection with. In some cases, there were initially clear prejudices against those groups.

The first night the TGB passed by us. We thought, “we’ll wait until they pass, I’m not going to resist or protest with them.” A trans friend of ours said that she had been resisting with them, and all of a sudden she found herself reciting the İstiklal March (national anthem of Turkey); total crowd psychology. Very strange mindsets, people really resisted together with very different groups. (LGBTI activist)

### Newfound Appreciation for Other Groups Through Perspective-Taking

Some participants noted a change in perspective within their own groups, and others noted a change in perspective for others. Here, a Revolutionary Muslim notes the way socialists start to view their group in a new and positive light.

We performed [Friday prayers] twice during the resistance. We made an announcement that we were going to perform the prayers and suddenly people had joined hands and created a blockade around us. Most likely they were worried about some provocation against the prayer. They were actually people from a socialist group who came together... This great image came out of it. On one side a group who are more religious performing their Friday prayer, and on the other a socialist group that is usually distant from religion protecting the people praying. It was a beautiful image. (Revolutionary Muslim)

For many, the Anti-capitalist and Revolutionary Muslims groups were a welcome change. Participants who had not previously participated in protests with religious groups found a common ground with them for the first time.

And meeting the Anti-capitalist Muslims was really interesting... Iftar meals, the earth tables were unbelievable... Even though I don’t fast, I really looked forward to the time to break fast because I was going to their earth table... They also went to the Cem house<sup>xi</sup> at one point, to show solidarity. That was really important, too. (Feminist activist)

One of the biggest issues of empathy discussed was between Turks and Kurds. Mentioned multiple times was a famous photograph taken during the protests, when a protester carrying the BDP<sup>xii</sup> flag took the hand of another protester carrying the Turkish flag to help him get away from police water cannons. Many participants noted instances where a common ground was found between these groups.

Of course we experienced really interesting things. The gas bombs that were thrown there, the injured people, the oppression; against all this, for example, nationalist Turks would come and say to us “We never understood you, you’ve experienced this oppression for years... there were also those who compared themselves to us, “Here in İstanbul’s center, they are calling us ‘enemy’, I wonder what happened in the east and we didn’t see it?” (Kurdish activist)

## Interaction and Solidarity Across Groups

Beyond just being together in the same place, groups began to interact during their 15-day occupation of the park. A sense of togetherness was mentioned that had not been seen before.

In these lands no one really lived together in fellowship before. Everyone was killing each other... this is a time where Gezi really passed the threshold. In that way it was really great. One of the most solid examples was the “Republican aunts.”<sup>xiii</sup> They would say “Turkey belongs to the Turks and will always belong to the Turks.” Even they changed... I could never even imagine I would see something like that. (Çarşı)

## Constructive Social Change

Participants provided anecdotes from their experiences during the protests, indicating that groups were able to create a shared sense of identity. They mainly discussed solidarity and identification with the LGBTI community, between football organizations that were previously at odds, and between Kurdish and Turkish nationalist protesters.

So they shout the slogan “We are Mustafa Kemal’s soldiers”, and then the Kurdish youth applauded them. This time they shouted the slogan “Long live Apo” and this time the nationalist youths applauded them. Then all together they shouted the slogan “Shoulder to shoulder against fascism.” ... They mutually applauded each other’s slogans and then shouted a slogan together. I mean, they shouted the slogans “shoulder to shoulder against fascism” and “Everywhere is Taksim, everywhere is resistance” together. This is a really important event; it really showed that when people are together where a resistance can take you. (ESP – Socialist Party of the Oppressed)

Change in the use of derogatory language was especially noted for football hooligans who participated in the protests.

We were at the park at night, some speeches were being made. Then people started to saying “Çarşı is coming.” Çarşı was shouting “faggot riot police” as they came. They came to the park... At that time all the LGBT block was there. We heard a really high voice shout the slogan “Velev ki ibneyiz, alışın her yerdeyiz! (Even though we are faggots, get used to it, we’re everywhere!)” Suddenly the women’s movement started to support them and then the whole park started to resonate with the sound of “even though we are faggots, get used to it, we’re everywhere.” And finally the Çarşı group was shouting the slogan “even though we’re faggots, get used to it, we’re everywhere.” (Taksim Solidarity)

Important to note is not just the change that occurred during the protests, but that participants mention that changes continued afterward as well.

But something really interesting happened in Turkey. Some sexist, homophobic curses and slogans shouted at [football] matches slowly started to dissipate. People started to control themselves. This was Gezi’s biggest social decency change. I don’t know where in the world you could see a movement like this. Revolt, they said, struggle they said, say whatever you want to say, there was a great chance for social learning there. The young were learning from the old, the old were learning from the young. All marginalized people came together and tried to understand each other. Kurds toward Turks, Turks toward Kurds. It was an amazing blend. (Taksim Solidarity)

### Main Category 3: Empowerment (Perceived Efficacy)

This main category included three subcategories in relation to empowerment experiences: 1) realizing the protesters are all similar and disadvantaged, 2) prejudice reduction against other disadvantaged groups (e.g., LGBTI activists), and 3) realizing they can transform society only if they come together despite their differences.

#### Seeing Similarities

The participants indicated that during the Gezi Park protests, they all realized that they had some things in common and they do not have any problems with each other. Although they identify themselves with various groups, organizations, and identities in general, this does not diminish their commonalities.

Different social groups who felt rage and thought they experienced injustice were clearly distant from each other. They started reaching out to each other. Republicans, Kurds, Beşiktaş supporters, Fenerbahçe supporters, and Galatasaray supporters, they all reached out to each other and saw that there was no difference between them. (Çarşı)

#### Changing Perspectives of Other Disadvantaged Groups

The participants also indicated that the Gezi Park protests provided a ground for them to understand others' injustice stories and change their perspectives in line with the disadvantaged one. A feminist activist mentioned how her son's perspectives changed after attending the protests.

Even my apolitical son went to the streets, he was at Gezi. He met with the Kurdish movement there. ... He met with the LGBTI [movement]. A lot changed in his head. I know that he will participate in the protests again and he will not refer to anyone as "other". (Feminist activist)

#### Unity for Societal Transformation

The third subcategory emerged based on participants' realizations of the importance of unity for achieving real changes at the societal level. An activist from TMMOB (The Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects) emphasized this point in his interview:

People realized that they could all stand up together. Even if they have different perspectives, they could act toward the same goal. (TMMOB)

Similarly, an activist from a socialist political party indicated the significance of being together, especially for those who are oppressed in the current political context of Turkey.

The Gezi movement captured this: oppressed people could win only if they struggle together and if they are organized concurrently. (ESP – Socialist Party of the Oppressed)

Likewise, a Kemalist participant emphasized the same point by indicating the positive role of the Gezi Park protests.

[The Gezi Park protests] brought many people from different groups together. Thus, people got to know each other closely. Some people could be biased before the protests. I think most of them vanished [after participating in the protests]. (Kemalist)

With the combination of changing perspectives toward one another and increased solidarity between groups, even those newly advantaged were able to work together with historically disadvantaged groups toward a common purpose.

## Discussion

Results suggest that collective action experiences are an extremely powerful way to not only reduce intergroup prejudice but also to take steps toward social justice. Interviews indicated that participants viewed themselves as disadvantaged both as a member of their individual groups (i.e., party or organization) and as a member of the Gezi Park protests in general. In line with collective action research (e.g., [Drury & Reicher, 2005](#)), participants noted instances of common identification that increased political solidarity during the park occupation. Finally, participants demonstrated that through collective action, they achieved their initial goal of Gezi Park staying a park, but also came to the realization that only through cooperation between them could the changes they strive for be achieved.

The idea that these changes last longer than the initial protest is theoretically compelling. Some leftist groups have come together to create coalitions and “fronts” in the days since the Gezi Park protests (e.g., *Birleşik Haziran Hareketi – BHH*, The United June Movement), calling on solidarity in the name of the “Gezi Spirit.” In doing so, they try to bring back the feelings of political togetherness experienced at the time. Especially after the foundation of BHH, the AKP government has implemented different restrictive measures, such as arresting any protester or taking her/him into custody without any reason if they participate in a protest. These measures may indicate the AKP feels threatened by any coalition against its government, and their potential to bring about broader change, which some participants feel has already begun to happen. Up until the general elections in June 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the AKP’s support had been steadily diminishing post-Gezi, while solidarity across disadvantaged groups continued (most notably the BHH and the HDP); opposition parties such as the HDP saw increased popularity and support.

The collective action model of prejudice reduction ([Dixon et al., 2012](#)) indicates that disadvantaged groups, when working together, can bring about policy change as well as change within the individual. As described above, participants perceived themselves to be in a disadvantaged position, either as an ethnic or religious minority in Turkey or as a political minority since the AKP came to power. Participants also described instances where groups overcame past prejudices by unifying and felt empowered after protesting together. It is clear that, beyond contact, solidarity experiences heightened by confrontation with police violence brought about these changes. Finally, participants noted that their experiences in the protests achieved their initial goal – for the park to remain a park – but also greater changes, including prejudice reduction, increased contact between groups, and willingness to work together after the protests ended.

## Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations to be addressed. First, despite their key role in the Gezi Park protests the number of female participants is relatively low (see [Uluğ & Acar, 2015](#)). The Gezi Park protests created an environment of increased visibility of women and of gender issues in general. It was shown in the interviews that some sort of awareness increased in terms of objecting to sexist and homophobic discourse, and there was evidence that they started to dissipate during the protests. We believe our study reflects that change despite the low number of female participants.

In addition, some participants have cross-cutting identities. For example, we approached one Kurdish activist based on his Kurdish identity, but he indicated that his being Kurdish did not play a key role in participating in the

protests. Similarly, another participant indicated that he defines himself both as a Çarşı supporter and member of a socialist party. So, both cross-cutting identities and the level of identification might be significant in terms of shaping the participants' understanding of intergroup dynamics and prejudice reduction perceptions (see also van Zomeren et al., 2008).

Future research might focus on long-term changes mentioned in the interviews, such as decreased prejudice against the LGBTI activists or feminists. It should also be investigated whether “newly” disadvantaged groups such as Kemalists or nationalist Turks question their former privileged position with these protests and whether these changes are still valid, for example, in terms of approaching the Kurdish problem. It is unclear whether these constructive changes will last among the different activists, or whether they may have spread to broader society.

## Conclusion

Intergroup contact has been suggested as a powerful method to combat prejudice in the literature, especially for majority and relatively advantaged position groups. Alternatively, a collective action approach to prejudice reduction (Dixon et al., 2012) would suggest that beneficial change is more likely if disadvantaged groups unify for change together. Our results support a collective action approach and indicate that solidarity experiences of disadvantaged group members were an integral part in their prejudice reduction experiences. Through acts of solidarity, disadvantaged groups have the ability to come together and create meaningful change that benefits them all.

## Notes

- i) See also <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2-5-milyon-insan-79-ilde-sokaga/gundem/detay/1726600/default.htm>
- ii) Çapulcu means looter in English. Erdoğan referred to the protesters as çapulcu and claimed that “a few looters” would not prevent him or the AKP government from their goals for Taksim and Gezi Park.
- iii) Kemalists are individuals who follow the political, economic, and social principles advocated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who was the founding leader of the modern republican secular Turkish state.
- iv) According to Blee and Taylor (2002), interview sampling in social movement research can rely on snowball sampling so long as attempts are made to follow the principles of similarity (e.g., the similarity of interpretations of accounts) and dissimilarity (e.g., very different characteristics or different circumstances).
- v) A group under the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) in Turkey who refer to themselves as “Turkish nationalists.”
- vi) TGB is an anti-imperialist Kemalist youth organization.
- vii) 53 people were killed in Reyhanlı, Hatay on May 11, 2013 after two car bombs exploded in what was until then the deadliest single terror attack on Turkish soil. The Turkish government implemented blanket censorship of all media, resulting in criticism and suspicion of the government's knowledge or role in the event.
- viii) On December 28, 2011, two Turkish F16 jets fired on 40 Kurdish villagers at the Turkish-Iraqi border based on information that they were PKK militants. The attack resulted in 34 deaths, including 19 children.
- ix) Authorities denied trade unions permission to march to Taksim Square and blocked bridges and roads around the city to prevent them doing so. Demonstrators attempted to reach Taksim Square anyway, and clashed with half of İstanbul's police force.
- x) An organization based in the Armenian community working on social and cultural issues.
- xi) Alevi house of worship.

xii) The name of this party was later changed to HDP (Halkların Demokratik Partisi-People's Democratic Party). A number of leftist parties united under HDP.

xiii) A term used for middle-aged, secular Kemalist women.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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